Revelation 4-5; Isaiah 6 "The Terror and Grace of the Thrice-Holy God" Dec 7, 2014

Intro: God is terrifying. He is powerful beyond words. That is, in trying to describe Him, we come to the end of our language, like Reepicheep vowed to row his boat until it gave out, then swim to reach that vast waterfall at the edge of the world. God alone is uncreated. He simply is. Everything else is contingent, dependent upon something or someone else for its existence. He alone simply is. He was, and is, and will be. This makes Him not merely the foundation of reality, but supremely superior to all else. Whomever sees a glimpse of His character, fears for his life. Even the angels don't dare to even look at him, for to see him is to be consumed. If he were not patient, we would have been annihilated eons ago. Jeremiah states it well in his Lamentations, "But for your steadfast love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail." This attribute of God is His holiness. Frequently forgotten, and commonly rejected in our affluent and arrogant culture, of which I am too much affiliated in heart, it is the preeminent characteristic of God that he has revealed. All other attributes flow from this central description of God's character. His love is holy love, His justice holy justice, His mercy holy mercy, His wrath holy wrath and His glory the public declaration of His holiness. The fact that we neglect and profane this truth of God is evident in how we respond to the most judgmental revelations of God. We feel that God *overreacts* by destroying 24,000 in Numbers 25, and for praising Phinehas for spearing through a brazen idolatrous man and his lover. We side with the sinner rather than the holy God. We feel that the flood was too much, that Hell is too permanent, that God's love must trump His justice, that sin isn't that devastating because God isn't that holy. We seek the life of humanity over the glory of the great name of God. Yet, God doesn't value created life over uncreated holiness. Our emotional reactions and soul struggle with these actions of God reveal that we, too, are prone to profane the perfect and powerful thrice-holy God. Only by grasping this central and terrifying truth will we ever plumb the depths of the greatness of the love and compassion and grace of God poured out, lavished, upon us when He sent His thrice-holy Son on a self-sacrificing mission to sanctify those guilty of the greatest cosmic terrorism and treason. The gospel begins with the holiness of God, ends with the holiness of God, and is through-and-through the gospel of the holiness of God.

1. God is Terrifying
    a. John enters the presence of God's throne room only upon invitation
        i. "Come up here!"
        ii. This part of the revelation begins with the ultimate and eternal reality that God is ALIVE and REIGNING over all things.
            1. God is alive; God is powerful; God is beautiful; God is reigning
            2. The reality is that God's revelation stretches the usefulness of words, for we come to the ends of our language before we come to the end of describing Him.
        iii. How often do we come to worship God, knowing His invitation, but without really expecting to be encountered by God
            1. We live, often, as if God is very distant, even unreal: we are functional atheists at times, aren't we?
    b. Terror of the Holy
        i. The angels in the presence of God are constantly proclaiming the superlative nature of God as "HOLY"
            1. Verbal repetition is a Hebraic way of expressing the superlative
                a. Jesus uses this technique to introduce teaching that he wants his disciples to expressly take note: "Truly, Truly"
                b. Genesis 14:10 indicates the numerous quantity of salty pits by saying, "There were asphalt pits pits in the valley of Shittim…"

2. Only one attribute of God is very raised to the third degree of repetition: God is holy, holy, holy
    a. The Scripture never states that God is love, love, love or justice, justice, justice, or mercy, mercy, mercy
    b. He is supremely distinct, incomparably unique, higher than the highest, purer than the purest, in every way he is in his own category completely
    c. He is more valuable than all life, more worthy than all goodness, more…greater…uncreated…absolutely transcendent!
        i. Transcendent – above, greater than, superlative over all!
        ii. Often, we struggle to think of God as fair when we see His judgment, the reality of Hell, the death of Ananias & Sapphira, etc.
        iii. This is because we don't grasp His transcendent holiness and thus think that their lives are more worthy than his being

ii. At these words, the declaration and expression of his supreme worthiness and majesty in superlative otherness, His throne flashes forth lightning and peals of thunder (Isaiah - the very foundation of the Temple shudders)
    1. The inanimate, unsinning, mouthless created things respond with propriety before the uncreated Holy One, i.e. they tremble in weakness and awe
    2. The animate things hit their faces in worship, proclaiming to the thrice holy Lord, "You are worthy to receive…"
    3. How can we, created in his image, ignore his majesty?

iii. The presence of the holy God immediately revealed the finitude, the weakness, the frailty, and the unworthiness of all created things to deep, terrible humility
    1. We tend to get pretty jacked up about great we are
        a. But how "great" we are is really laid open in the presence of the truly GREAT
        b. This is true of the "living creatures" who dwelt the closest to God
            i. The seraphim of Isaiah 6, the "living creatures" of Ezekiel 1, are all examples of sinless servants who still must hide their faces and hit the ground in worship in the presence of the thrice-holy God
            ii. Thus, it is not merely sin that humbles us, but *creaturliness* that humbles us before the uncreated, eternal one
        c. Thus, the living creatures and the 24 elders proclaim together, "You are worthy to receive glory and honor and power for *you created all things and by your will they are existing and have been created."*
    2. The holiness of God strikes terror into Man, particularly, when God reveals Himself because Man is both weak in knowledge and power AND sinful in mutinous arrogance
        a. There is a pattern of human response to God's holiness
            i. Job
                1. He challenged God with cruelty for his suffering (30:21), claiming that his suffering was inordinate to the worthiness of his life because God "held a grudge" against him.
                2. Yet, when God answered him, Job responds to God's revelation of His supreme, uncreated, holy character with, "I uttered words without knowledge, I spoke of things too

wonderful for me… I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

ii. Habakkuk
    1. He runs up his watchtower to set his feet, shake his fist, and prepare his argument that God was either unjust for watching evil happen or that God was careless and evil because evil seemed to prevail.
    2. Then God reveals Himself with "Write this down, so that whomever reads it might run away."
    3. Hab responds upon seeing the great holy power and majesty of the Lord, "In your wrath remember mercy…I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. I will wait quietly…"

iii. Jeremiah
    1. Responds with "my heart is broken, all my bones tremble; I stumble like a drunk man overcome with wine because of the LORD and His holy words." (Jer 23:9)

iv. Isaiah
    1. "Woe is me"
        a. Isa also assumed, rightly so, that the holiness of God would *rightly* consume him, destroy Him, and his knees knocked
        b. The greatness of the King, ruling on the throne, knocked the pretentious prophet down to his face in fear, his strength suddenly gone
    2. "I am ruined"
        a. Torn-apart
        b. Everything that he thought he "had together" was now revealed to be "torn apart", everything "integrated" in his life was now "disintegrated" by the holiness of God
    3. What was it that Isa specifically lists as the reason for his fear and disintegration?
        a. "I am a man of unclean lips"
        b. empty religious words (Isa 29:13)
        c. And he like his culture of profanity

3. Unclean words = profanity – not swear words, but making the holy things profane
    a. The opposite of holy is the word "profane", which simply means "common"
    b. Thus, profanities are not evil words, but common words which do not fit the sanctity or weightiness of the moment.
    c. In the same way, using common words with common attitude, as if everything is normal and un-majestic in the presence of God is not befitting His holy presence
4. Our self-righteous empty religion is laid bare in the presence of the Holy God

2. This Terror of the Thrice-Holy God is Only Assuaged by the Amazing Grace of the Thrice-Holy God
    a. Jesus is the "Holy! Holy! Holy!" Son of God
        i. John states that Isaiah saw the glory of JESUS!!
        ii. The demons recognize their authority and their destruction in Jesus (Luke 4:34) when they call Jesus, "The Holy One of God!"
        iii. Everything about Jesus is the thrice-holy majesty!!
    b. The revelation of John moves from the holiness of God to the problem of the seals to the solution of the seals: the slain Lamb of God
        i. The question, "Who is worthy to open God's authoritative revelation (sealed scroll)…" is answered with "The Lion of the tribe of Judah has overcome…"
            1. The scroll is indicative of authority, for only the one who has authority to break the seals has authority to read and reveal God's message.
            2. The picture is one of a warrior triumphant who has the power/authority.
            3. Yet, when John turns to look, what does he see? Not a lion, but a….Lamb with fatal wounds.
        ii. Thus, the problem of God's holiness and the judgment upon sinners is only answerable by one worthy to bring a solution: Jesus Christ, the *crucified* thrice-holy Son of God
        iii. Thus, the living creatures and elders sing again a *new song*, a song befitting this particular work of the Lamb
        iv. "You are worthy…for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, to make them a kingdom and priest before our God."
            1. That is, by the blood of Jesus, He *sanctified* (made holy) a diversity of people and *made them fit* for His *holy* Kingdom and for *holy* service.
            2. Then, an innumerable throng of people singing out boisterously, "The Lamb who was slain is worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"
            3. Then, all creation sings, "To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"
            4. And they fall down and worship (see Moses, etc. in the presence of the holy God!)
    c. God's holiness is never lessened, but He fits those in Christ Jesus for glory by substituting Himself
        i. From the place of substitution, of sacrifice
        ii. Thus, when Mary declares, "Holy is your name" upon hearing of her blessed part in the arrival of the Messiah, she is declaring God's holy provision for God's holy plan to make holy His people who are not holy
        iii. God is to be praised for reaching into the altar of His own fiery justice, that of the thrice holy God, and "purifying a people for his own possession" by sending His Son
    d. God gave a verdict of "forgiven" before there was anything by which to draw God's favor
        i. It is when we are weak, helpless, on our faces that God rushes in to solve the tension between our sin and His holiness
            1. This is what grace means: the pardon *precedes* the performance
            2. We are weak, powerless, with nothing to offer God that would alleviate this terror or prove that we are adequate to stand in His holy presence
        ii. Thus, "You are worthy to receive all the glory!" sung to the Lord. It is HIS work!

e. The greater that we recognize the holiness and transcendence of God, the greater we recognize the severity and weightiness (glory) of His forgiveness, love, and mercy towards us in Christ Jesus, and the greater our love, appreciation, trust, and obedience flow.
    i. He who has been forgiven little/much loves little/much.
        1. This is not a statement of objective measures of forgiveness, but of perceived sin.
        2. To the magnitude that I recognize my sin in the light of His holiness, thus recognize the magnitude of His forgiveness of it, determines the magnitude of my love.
    ii. "He that hath slight thoughts of sin never had great thoughts of God." – John Owen
        1. He who has low thoughts of God's holiness has little thoughts of God's love.
        2. The greater we plumb the holiness of God, with all its tears and terrors, is the degree to which we plumb the depths of His grace towards us in Christ Jesus, with all its joys and jubilance.

So what does it mean that this thrice-holy God would not merely show mercy, as if he just swept our sins under the rug, but that this thrice-holy God, the uncreated One who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16), the unique and only non-subsistent eternal God, would humble Himself to take the form of servant, to become forever united to Man, even to the point of death on a cross, shamed and executed as a common, profane, cursed, criminal…for you?

For you and for me, the profane ones, the mutinous ones, the ones who still treat Him as common too often, who think high thoughts of ourselves and call the Uncreated One "the man upstairs?" He died for mutinous throne-grabbers, arrogant back-turners, foolish, ignorant, boastful, people whom He has set His love upon out of His own free will? He did! He did! He does! He has! He is worthy to receive all honor and praise and power and glory because He did humble Himself to die to redeem us sinners! In Christ we are made holy by the thrice holy One! Fly to Him, you strugglers and sinners, let us repent of profaning Him and find in His own provision the glorious grace of God poured out upon us by His Spirit through His Son for His the sake of His holy name and for the love of His beloved Son and the joy of His chosen Bride.